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More fitting clothes urged

By Jaclyn Giovis and Tribune Newspapers: South Florida Sun-Sentinel
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Can't find clothes that fit?

Don't worry. You're not alone. One of the biggest complaints consumers have when shopping for clothes is finding the right size, industry experts say.

But imagine if a size 8 were a size 8 at every store.

New technology, developed by a small Dallas company, claims to solve the nation's fit crisis and make shoppers happy to head to the dressing rooms.

Fit Technologies Inc., which tested its strategy on select brands at Macy's, Nordstrom and QVC last year, has created a universal sizing system based on three common body shapes--straight, hourglass and pear-shaped.

"Women think there's something wrong with them if they don't find something that fits," said Cricket Lee, founder and president of Fit Technologies. "But brands intentionally keep their fit different from their competitors.

Lee, who spoke last week at the National Retail Federation's 2007 Convention & Expo in New York, wants to take the guesswork out of finding the right pants size by selling her Fitlogic system to clothingmakers. She is trying to revolutionize the industry, and that doesn't come easy.

Finding clothes that fit would be a dream come true for Joanne Resta of Ft. Lauderdale, who is tired of taking armfuls of pants into the dressing room only to find that none fit, or they require expensive tailoring.

"I hate to shop because of that," said Resta, 51. "I only shop when I'm desperate."

Resta says her long torso, small waist and curvy hips make shopping frustrating and time-consuming.

"It's a nightmare," said Resta, while shopping for sportswear at a Ft. Lauderdale Macy's. "It's going to take me hours. And I don't want to spend my time doing this."

Most consumers face the same problem, according to research by The NPD Group, which reports about 84 percent of women claim say they are unable to find clothing that fits.

The fit problem has churned other staggering statistics: About 68 percent of women claim that shopping has gone from being a leisure-time activity to being a chore, and 55 percent hate or refuse to try on clothes, NPD research shows.

That may explain why the apparel industry grapples with so many returns. Poor or inconsistent fit accounts for more than \$11 billion in lost women's apparel sales, consumer research shows.

All of this paints a gloomy forecast for the future of the apparel industry, which is losing its share of consumer dollars as shoppers spend more on accessories, cosmetics and electronics.

There's little doubt that consumers would benefit from a universal sizing system. But the concept is not entirely embraced by designers, who use fit to differentiate their brand from their competitors.

"Brands want to have unique fit because that's what they find creates a loyalty among customers," said Marshall Cohen, chief industry analyst for the NPD Group. And most brands are not willing to change their thinking for the consumer's sake, he said.

Many consumers have trouble with fit because clothing designers often use a model that assumes each woman is about 5-foot, 8-inches and thin enough for the runway. The sizes graduate from that assumption, which factors in little room for hips or a robust backside. Meanwhile, some garmentmakers have adopted a vanity-sizing formula that has increased the size of their clothing without changing the size label

Even brands that try to be consistent can be thrown off when a fit model's weight fluctuates or the company changes clothing manufacturers.

"It's such a complicated situation out there that consumers don't know what's going on," said David Wolfe, one of the nation's leading fashion experts.

As a result, many consumers shop at fewer stores, while others have stopped buying clothing altogether, Wolfe says.

"Price used to be the major consideration," he said. "Now, fit has become the major consideration."

Some brands have taken a stab at making their sizing model transparent by marketing styles according to fit descriptions. For example, Ann Taylor has the Audrey, the Margo and the Lindsay pants, all of which sit differently at the waist. Lane Bryant offers five different pant fits for plus-size shoppers.

Still, the fashion industry is a long way from embracing a standardized system, and designers aren't the only ones resisting change. Retailers also challenge the practical application of a universal fit system.

To implement the Fitlogic system, for example, retailers would have to carry three of versions of every size, one for each body type, and train their employees on how to sell the merchandise. Generally, retailers prefer to keep slim inventories and showcase a variety of merchandise in their stores, so they can continue to turn over fresh items at full price.

"It's going to take a [successful] pioneer" to induce change, Cohen said, noting Lee might be better off creating her own retail brand than trying to convince the industry to adopt her fit system.

Four years after starting her company, Lee still is playing the role of consumer advocate. She designed the Fitlogic system after getting fed up with her own search for a good fit: The 53-year-old woman isn't shy about saying she is 245 pounds and wears a size 18-wide.

Some companies have balked, while others have asked to buy her research or implement the system as a private brand, said Lee, noting she "didn't sell out."

Although she has not convinced the industry to adopt her method, Fitlogic will launch online this fall at a few retailers, said Lee, declining to announce brand names or stores.

The initial release will feature career pants priced between \$59 and \$199. By spring 2008, she hopes to add tops and jackets.

"It's just a matter of time," Lee said. "I'm positive it'll transform the industry."